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ABSTRACT

The confidant relationship is a qualitatively distinct dimension of the emotional support system of the aged, yet the composition of the confidant network has been largely neglected in research on aging. Persons (N=940) 60 years of age and older were interviewed about their socio-environmental setting. From the enumeration of their relatives, respondents identified those with whom they were very close. Asymmetry of gender was prevalent in confidant relationships with children and siblings. Females were more constrained by asymmetry of gender; asymmetry restraints were strongest for the never-married and weakest for widows and widowers. Females were most likely to be confidant relatives in all cases. Although findings revealed greater reliance for confidant relations among the family of procreation than among the family of orientation, siblings compensated for the absence of children and spouses. Support for the continued strength of relations with siblings during advanced age was also found. Relationships of the young-old with their old-old parents appeared less close than with their children. (Author/NRB)

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CONFIDANT RELATIONS OF THE AGED*

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Introduction

Despite the evidence regarding the psychological buffering power of confidant relationships, there has been a paucity of research on the nature of these types of relationships for the elderly. Most studies in the gerontological literature have been concerned with the quantity of relations of the old, but have given little, if any, attention to the quality of these relations. It is a qualitative dimension of relationships, the confidant relation, that has been distinguished and investigated in this study. The most intimate (i.e., personal) revelations of thoughts and feelings to others often take a dyadic form in relationships. These dyadic relationships in which the individual-exclusive contents are the axis of the relationship are here referred to as confidant relationships.

Here we will report on the factors which (1) affect the likelihood of an elderly person having a confidant among relatives and (2) relate to the type of confidant relatives the elderly individual has.

Design of the Study

Investigation of the nature of the confidant relationships of the elderly was undertaken in a field study of the relations of elderly Missourians conducted in a survey research format. The information analyzed is extracted from a larger three year study, the fieldwork was completed in 1978. The respondents, individuals 60 years of age and older, were both male and female but were not interviewed as couples. They were drawn from communities within the state of Missouri which represent a wide spread of population size and community characteristics. The ten selected communities range in population from 130 persons in the smallest town to 65,000 in a moderately large setting.

Selection of the 1,100 persons who comprised the sampling frame was accomplished by sampling from a list in the smallest seven communities and sampling by area in the three largest communities. A total of 940 interviews were completed.

Operationally defined, a confidant of any type was a person with whom the respondent felt he/she could talk about nearly everything.

Theoretical Issues/Implications

Theoretically, the issue of compensation in support systems of the aged looms large (Cantor, 1976; Cantor and Johnson, 1978). Viewing the confidant relation as one type of emotional support, the relevance of the issue of compensation in confidant relations can also be seen. Compensation implies a greater degree of reliance upon one resource over others due to the absence of another resource. For example, the lack of availability of one resource, such as the absence of kin within the old person's community, may be compensated for in the confidant network by an exclusive reliance upon the other available resource pools (friends and neighbors only are confidants). Within the literature concerning family relations, the lack of children is thought to be compensated for by more contact with siblings (Cantor and Johnson, 1978; Cumming and Schneider, 1961; Troll, 1971).

The work on social networks by Elizabeth Bott (1957) suggested that there exists a finite pool of interactional resources to be used; heavy dependence upon one source for sociability leaves less time and energy, as well as need, for the other potential sources. Persons can demand and provide only limited quantities of social interaction of an intimate or informal nature. Support for the notion is shown by findings, such as Shulman's (1975), that individuals with spouses will have fewer needs to be met and less available time for involvement with other intimates than those who are single.

Weiss (1969) challenged the notion of a "fund of sociability" and proposed a theory of the "functional specificity of relationships" to counter the rejected concept. The major premises of this theory were that individuals have needs which can only be met in relationships, and that these relationships become relatively specialized according to the needs for which they provide. Consequently, individuals require a number of different kinds of relationships for well-being. Weiss documented five relational functions as apparent in life experiences: intimacy, social integration, nurturance, reassurance of worth, and assistance. The relevance of this theory for the aged population is great when the prevalence of losses to this age group is considered. Quality, not quantity, is important in replacing lost relationships; new relationships should be established which provide the same function as those lost.

Findings

Our examination of the composition of the confidant network of the elderly respondents of this study reaffirms what others (e.g. Babchuk, 1978) have found: the old are generally not an isolated population. Importantly, the quality of their relationships which was investigated here, reveals that only six percent of the total sample were without the very close emotional support, known as a confidant relation. Further, for most elderly, dependence for this confidant relationship was not restricted to one individual, or one type of individual. Nearly half of the sample had confidants drawn from among friends, neighbors, and relatives.

Number of Confidant Relatives. The only personal characteristic of the respondent which was significantly related to the number of confidant kin was sex (Table 1). Females were more likely than males to have a relative as a confidant, and also more likely to have one or two such relatives.

The number of relatives the elderly person had living within his or her own community significantly influenced the likelihood of having a confidant relative (Table 2). Those with no local relatives were more likely (28 percent) to be without a confidant relative than those with one to three relatives in their community (22 percent), and than those with four or more local relatives (12 percent). The same trend was visible for those with two or more confidant relatives.

The number of relatives of the respondent, both local and non-local, was related to the number of confidant kin (Table 3). Looking at the extremes of the number of relatives, those with few (one to four) relatives were over two times as likely as those with ten or more relatives to be without a relative as a confidant. In the same way, those with few relatives were much less likely (6 percent) than those with many relatives (24 percent) to have four or more relatives as confidants.

Sex of Confidant Relative. Women were more likely than men to be confidant relatives by a ratio of six to four. Sex of respondent appears to be the strongest factor influencing sex of confidant (Table 4). Women were most likely to have women relatives as confidants; women relatives constituted nearly two-thirds of all confidant kin of women respondents. Men, on the other hand, were as likely to have female relatives as male relatives for confidants.

Marital status influenced the likelihood of having a male confidant relative in the following progression (from most likely to least likely): married, widowed, single, and divorced (Table 5).

In Table 6 the effect of sex on marital status was controlled since, in old age, men are more likely than women to be married. Married, divorced, and single women were all more likely than widowed women and all men to have

Table 1

PER CENT OF MALES AND FEMALES WITH CONFIDANT RELATIVES

Sex	Number of Confidant Relatives					Total N
	None	One	Two	Three	Four or more	
Female	16	40	26	8	11	517
Male	27	35	18	9	11	337

Chi square = 20.20, 4 d.f., $p < .001$

Table 2

PER CENT WITH CONFIDANT RELATIVES BY NUMBER OF RELATIVES LIVING IN RESPONDENT'S COMMUNITY

Relatives in Community	Number of Confidant Relatives					Total N
	None	One	Two	Three	Four or more	
None	30	35	21	7	8	92
1 to 3	24	40	22	6	9	390
4 or more	13	36	25	11	15	363

Chi square = 31.86, 8 d.f., $p < .0001$

Table 3

PER CENT WITH CONFIDANT RELATIVES BY TOTAL NUMBER OF RELATIVES

Number of Relatives	Number of Confidant Relatives					
	None	One	Two	Three	Four or more	Total N
1 to 4	27	40	22	6	6	332
5 to 9	17	39	24	10	11	362
10 or more	11	31	24	10	24	141

Chi square = 63.43, 10 d.f., $p < .0001$

women relatives as confidants. Widowed persons of both sexes were most likely to have a confidant of the opposite sex.

The chances of having a male confidant relative was least for those with no sons and greatest for those with two or more sons (Table 7). The trend reversed when presence of a daughter was considered; those with no daughters were most likely to have male confidant relatives. The presence or absence of siblings did not affect the sex of the confidant relative.

Kin Relationship of Confidant. Assymmetry of gender in confidant relations was demonstrated as sex of respondent was found to influence the type of confidant relative when the categories of son, daughter, wife, husband, mother, father, sister, brother and more distant relatives were considered (Table 8). Men were less likely than women to name daughters as confidants, and more likely to name sons. Women were more likely than men to name sisters as

confidants, and less likely to name brothers. Although the format of the question in the interview was not conducive to elicitation of spouse as possible confidant (asking for particularly intimate relatives), more males than females listed their spouses as confidants.

Examination of the effect of marital status on type of relative confidant revealed widowed most likely to have a daughter confidant, and divorced least likely to have either a daughter or a son confidant (Table 9). Singles were most likely to rely on sisters and brothers to serve as confidants, as well as being most likely to have a more distant relative as confidant. Though widowed, divorced and married were about equally likely to have a confidant sister, widowed were least likely of all marital status groups to have a confidant brother. Widowed and married elderly were least likely to have other relative confidants.

Consideration of the effect of the number of daughters of the respondent on confidant relatives (Table 10), revealed the greatest likelihood of having a confidant daughter where two or more daughters were living. However, the likelihood of having a sister, brother, or more distant relative confidant was affected by the number of daughters in the opposite way; those with no daughters were most likely of all groups to have a sister or more distant relative as a confidant and as likely as those with an only daughter to have a brother confidant.

The number of living sons had a nearly identical effect on the likelihood of siblings and more distant relatives as confidants, and affected the likelihood of daughter and son confidants in a parallel manner (Table 10). The greatest likelihood of listing sons and daughters as confidants was coincident with having two or more sons.

Table 4

SEX OF CONFIDANT RELATIVES OF MALES AND FEMALES

(In Per Cent)

Sex	Sex of Confidant Relative		Total Responses
	Female	Male	
Female	65	35	777
Male	51	49	444

Table 5

PER CENT WITH MALE AND FEMALE CONFIDANT RELATIVES BY MARITAL STATUS

Marital Status	Sex of Confidant Relative		Total Responses
	Female	Male	
Married	57	44	616
Divorced/Separated	68	33	43
Widowed	63	37	527
Single	66	34	32

Table 6

SEX OF CONFIDANT RELATIVE BY MARITAL STATUS
ACCORDING TO SEX OF RESPONDENT
(In Per Cents)

Sex	Sex of Confidant Relative		Total Responses
	Female	Male	
Female			
Married	68	32	255
Divorced	71	29	35
Widowed	63	37	159
Single	72	28	25
Male			
Married	49	51	361
Divorced	50	50	8
Widowed	63	37	68
Single	43	57	7

Table 7

PER CENT WITH MALE AND FEMALE CONFIDANT RELATIVES
BY NUMBER OF SONS, DAUGHTERS, AND SIBLINGS

Number of:	Sex of Confidant Relative		Total Responses
	Female	Male	
Sons			
None	73	27	416
One	57	43	379
Two or more	49	51	417
Daughters			
None	54	46	386
One	57	43	412
Two or more	69	32	409
Siblings			
None	62	38	230
One	59	41	305
Two or more	60	41	681

Table 8

TYPE OF CONFIDANT RELATIVES OF MALES AND FEMALES (In Per Cent)

Sex	Type of Confidant Relative								Other	Total Responses
	Family of Procreation				Family of Orientation					
	Daughter	Son	Wife	Husband	Mother	Father	Sister	Brother		
Female	28	20	0	1	1	0	18	7	25	786
Male	22	28	4	0	1	0	13	12	20	450

Table 9

TYPE OF CONFIDANT RELATIVE BY MARITAL STATUS (In Per Cent)

Marital Status	Type of Confidant Relative								Other	Total Responses
	Family of Procreation				Family of Orientation					
	Daughter	Son	Wife	Husband	Mother	Father	Sister	Brother		
Married	25	24	3	2	1	0	16	11	18	626
Divorced/Separated	21	14	0	0	0	0	14	9	42	43
Widowed	30	23	0	0	0	0	15	6	26	531
Single	0	0	0	0	3	0	39	21	36	3314

Table 10

TYPE OF CONFIDANT RELATIVE BY NUMBER OF SONS, DAUGHTERS, AND SIBLINGS (In Per Cent)

Number of:	Type of Confidant Relative									Total Responses
	Family of Procreation				Family of Orientation				Other	
	Daughter	Son	Wife	Husband	Mother	Father	Sister	Brother		
Sons										
None	26	0	2	1	1	1	24	12	34	422
One	27	25	2	1	1	0	12	10	23	386
Two or more	26	44	2	1	1	0	11	5	10	418
Daughters										
None	0	23	1	0	1	0	23	12	38	395
One	30	24	2	1	1	0	15	9	18	415
Two or more	47	21	2	1	1	0	10	6	13	411
Siblings										
None	29	21	3	0	1	0	0	0	43	238
One	30	26	1	1	0	0	9	5	27	306
Two or more	23	22	2	1	1	0	24	13	14	687

The data was examined for the relationship between number of siblings living and the type of confidant relative as well (Table 10). A pattern similar to that found for number of sons and daughters was revealed; having two or more siblings more than doubled the likelihood of having a brother or sister confidant compared to having just one sibling. The greatest likelihood of having a sons or daughter confidant appears where there is only one sibling living.

In Table 11, the age of the respondent was examined in relation to the number of siblings and type of confidant relative since the survival rate of siblings is likely to be affected by advanced age. Sisters and brothers were only slightly more likely (26 and 16 percent) to be confidants of those 60 to 69 years old than they were for the older age groups (22 and 11 percent), when two or more siblings were living. In each age group, the more distant relatives were most heavily drawn upon as confidants when the respondent had no living siblings.

Considering only those respondents who had one or both parents living, listing a parent as a confidant occurred in only 12 percent of the responses (Table 12). Daughters and sons were less likely to be listed by this group than by all respondents, though reliance upon brothers and sisters as confidants was about the same.

Discussion

Asymmetry of gender was likely in the confidant relationships with children and siblings. Females were more constrained by asymmetry of gender with confidant relatives, being less likely than males to have confidants of the opposite sex. Asymmetry constraints appeared to be strongest for spinsters and bachelors and weakest for widows and widowers. Daughters were

the most likely to be confidants of the specific relatives considered, followed by sons, sisters, and brothers. This reveals greater reliance for confidant relations upon the family of procreation than upon the family of orientation.

Support for the findings of Rosenberg and Anspach (1973) and Young and Willmott (1957) that relations with siblings become attenuated with advanced age cannot be inferred from these findings since this study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Though the issue of attenuation versus increased importance of sibling ties in late life cannot be settled by comparison of different age cohorts at the same point in time, this study can provide clues to the possible nature of the process. Siblings were confidants only about half as often in old-old age as in young-old age; however, no difference was found when the number of siblings was controlled. Compensation for the absence of sibling confidants in the old-old age cohort appears to be primarily the function of the secondary and distant confidant relatives, and, to a lesser degree, of the children.

Although no measure of closeness from those listed as confidants was obtained, the degree of reciprocity of confidence-sharing by adult children might be inferred from the absence of parents of the elderly as confidants where one or both of the parents were still living. This substantiates the literature which indicates a one-sidedness in the affective quality of relationships of elderly parents to their adult children (Sussman, 1976).

Females were most likely to be confidant relatives in all cases, indicative of the centrality of the female in family relationships (Reiss, 1962; Cumming and Schneider, 1961). The prevalence of children as confidants was indicated by the greater likelihood of female confidants where daughters were present than where they were absent, and the decreased likelihood of

Table 12

TYPE OF CONFIDANT RELATIVE BY NUMBER OF SIBLINGS ACCORDING TO AGE OF RESPONDENT (In Per Cent)

Age	Type of Confidant Relative: Family of Procreation: Daughter	Son	Wife	Husband	Family of Orientation: Mother	Father	Sister	Brother	Other	Total Responses
60 to 69										
No siblings	29	15	3	2	5	0	0	0	44	62
One sibling	32	21	0	2	1	0	10	5	30	112
Two or more siblings	22	20	2	2	1	0	26	16	12	293
70 to 79										
No siblings	28	27	3	0	0	0	0	0	39	71
One sibling	26	30	4	2	0	0	10	6	23	113
Two or more siblings	23	24	2	0	0	0	22	11	17	268
80 and Older										
No siblings	27	21	2	0	0	1	0	0	46	105
One sibling	33	26	0	0	0	0	6	5	30	81
Two or more siblings	29	26	1	0	0	0	22	11	12	121

Table 13

TYPE OF CONFIDANT RELATIVE OF ELDERLY
WITH ONE OR BOTH PARENTS LIVING[a]

Type of Confidant Relative	Number	Per Cent of Responses
Daughter	16	21
Son	14	18
Wife	4	5
Mother	8	10
Father	1	1
Sister	13	17
Brother	8	10
Other	14	18

[a]21 missing cases, 47 valid cases.

female confidants where sons were present than where they were absent.

The analysis of specific kin as confidants suggests that siblings may compensate for the absence of children and spouses, but children do not compensate for the absence of siblings, and daughters and sons do not compensate for absences of each other. Both sisters and brothers have greater likelihoods of being confidants when there are no living sons or no living daughters than when one or more sons or daughters are living. Siblings are much more likely to be confidants of single elderly than any other marital status group, compensating for the life-long absence of spouse and children.

In conclusion, there was support in this study for the theoretical position which maintains that the absence of certain emotional resources, i.e., family members such as daughters, sons and siblings, is compensated for by utilization of other emotional resources. Evidence of a qualitative distinctiveness of confidant types which cannot be substituted for each other was not apparent in our study. In addition to the support for a compensatory view of confidant relations, this research substantiated the findings of others that gender is a significant variable <u>influencing</u> the nature of confidant relations.

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